Savage Minds

Notes and Queries in Anthropology

The writing behind the written

September 15, 2014 **Carole McGranahan**

*(Savage Minds is pleased to run this essay by guest author **Noel B. Salazar** as part of our **Writer's Workshop series**. Noel is Research Professor at the Faculty of the Social Sciences at the University of Leuven. He is the author of **Envisioning Eden: Mobilizing Imaginaries in Tourism and Beyond** (Berghahn, 2010), and is co-editor with Nelson H.H. Graburn of **Tourism Imaginaries: Anthropological Approaches** (Berghahn, 2014), and with Nina Glick Schiller of **Regimes of Mobility: Imaginaries and Relationalities of Power** (Routledge, 2014). Scholar of tourism, cosmopolitanism, and varied forms of social and cultural mobility, Noel is currently serving as president of the **European Association of Social Anthropologists**.)*

While I'm brainstorming ideas for this writers' workshop series, my pre-school daughter is sitting next to me. Even though she can't read or write yet, she's fascinated by letters. As I type along on my laptop,

she jots down her own invented script in a little notebook. It reminds me of my own journey of discovery of "the written word." I had barely mastered the technicalities of handwriting when I started scribbling in personal diaries. As a teenager, I complemented these self-absorbed writings with more social formats as I exchanged snail mail letters with pen pals from across the globe. My first love relationships added poetry to the list and I became an avid journalist for my school's newspaper (named "Boomerang," hinting at the importance of reader reception). I continued some of that work at university, where I took a specialized course in journalism and experimented with a range of academic writing styles and formats. I also became a "critical writing fellow," helping undergraduates to translate thoughts into words. When I moved abroad (which happened multiple times), I mailed weekly electronic "letters from [destination X]" to relatives and friends. I kept this tradition during my doctoral fieldwork, in addition to launching an ethnographic blog. So it's no exaggeration to state that I like writing.

I became aware of the importance of writing for anthropologists from the moment I enrolled in an anthro program. Now that I teach, I realize that the majority of our course assessments are based on paper assignments. Even though we offer MA students the alternative to produce an ethnographic film (instead of the traditional thesis), we still require a supplementary explanatory document.

Fieldwork remains an important hallmark of our training, but in the end we value most the latter part of the word "ethno-*graphy*": writing. The less you have written, the less you realize how much time and energy goes into the process that leads to a product worth reading—be it a monograph, a peer-reviewed article, a research proposal, or something else. Unless you're a prodigy, creating a quality text requires sustained effort (and patience). I involve my graduate students in reading and commenting upon the various drafts of my own manuscripts in order to give them a sense of the writing labor.

Let's be honest, not everything written is worth publishing. It takes courage to abandon a writing project that, for some reason or the other, does not seem to pan out. Unfortunately, the increasing pressure in many academic cultures across the globe to publish more (or perish instead) has led to a noticeable decrease in quality of academic output. Anthropology is a notoriously "slow science" and does not really fit the dominant mold of "quick and dirty" scholarship. It takes time to prepare our research, collect our data, and analyze them properly. We should certainly not try to compromise by reducing the write-up time. In my experience, there's something mysterious about the writing process. When or how it happens is impossible to predict, but the moment a new insight dawns and the various parts of the (often complicated) puzzle start coming together,

the *Aha-Erlebnis* or Eureka effect, is kind of magical. This is what I'm trying to achieve in my own work, but is also what I'm looking for when reading other texts.

While there are many excellent resources available concerning how anthropologists should write, less attention is given to our intended audience(s). Apart from some exceptions (e.g. ,writing as therapy), we write expecting that someone will read us. For whom do we write and for whom should we be writing? This is not a trivial question because our answer partly determines our writing style. While internal dialogue and exchange are important for the discipline to grow intellectually, far too many precious anthropological insights are lost because the readership does not reach beyond the boundaries of academic anthropology. The blame does not necessarily lie with the author. There is something terribly wrong with academic publishing models that limit free access to scholarly writings, particularly when the underlying research is supported by public funding.

Apart from accessibility, there is the issue of readability. Is it not contradictory that academics in countries such as France have a long history as public intellectuals, participating actively in societal debates, but that most of their scholarly writings are so arcane? I am pleased to see an increased global presence of anthropologists in

newspaper and magazine op-eds and postings on blogs and websites. This is relevant work and we should continue to do it because it broadens our readership. I see this as complementary to our other scholarly work, not as a replacement for it. Many of the most popular anthropologists are gifted writers. Grounded ethnographic fieldwork and experience lies at the basis of their narratives. As Henry David Thoreau wrote: "How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live!" However, to wit, captivating storytelling is only one part of the story. Good ethnographers are also capable of translating complex anthropological analyses into a language that is understood by broad audiences.

In sum, as anthropologists we have a whole array of tools at our disposal to upgrade our writing skills and to increase the impact of our work. With the constructive help of mentors and peers, we need to find our own way of mastering the art of writing. We should not get lost in the plethora of formats and fora available but focus on those types of writing that suit anthropology best and that matter. Only sustained practice (which includes occasional failure) can make us excel. This involves not only working on our own texts but also learning by reading what others have written. After all, a good anthropologist is not only an excellent writer but also a seasoned reader. So I look forward to reading your comments on my ideas.

Meanwhile, I return back to my writing desk… and the fantasy world of my daughter.

Invited post, **Writers' Workshop** **academic writing**, **anthropology and writing**, **Noel Salazar**, **writers' workshop**, **writing process**

3 thoughts on "The writing behind the written"

September 16, 2014 at 2:11 pm

M.J. Kiran

I'm glad you quoted Thoreau, the inclusion of which implies that good writing usually is preceded by good reading. That is, enjoying how other people write can help shape a writer's craft.

Pingback: **Announcing the Fall 2014 Writers' Workshop series! | Savage Minds**

September 18, 2014 at 11:01 pm

John McCreery

Have you ever noticed how difficult it is to comment when you read something and find yourself nodding "Yes, yes" on every line? I wonder if anthropological education, with its focus on critique instead of building on what others have written isn't part of the problem here.

When I ask myself what I learned in seminars in graduate school, the first thing that comes to mind is "Lurk until you see a chance to put the knife in." It wasn't until I started working for an advertising agency that I met people who would say, "Let's see what we can do with that" and start a conversation that piled one improvement on top of another.